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OCULOS EFFODERE

BY H. C. NUTTING

It is narrated of the emperor Nero that one of his pastimes was to disguise himself and to go roistering about town at night, indulging in all sorts of wild and disorderly conduct. On this point Suetonius remarks:

Nero, 26. 2: *Ac saepe in eius modi rixis oculorum et vitae periculum adiit, a quodam laticlavio, cuius uxorem attractaverat, prope ad necem caesus.*

In view of the drastic punishment inflicted by the senator whose wife was accosted, the phrase *vitae periculum adiit* is clearly justified. But why is not *oculorum . . . periculum* better defined?

A Roman would not ask this question, for the reason that, in personal encounters, it appears to have been the general practice to aim by preference at the eye—not with intent to blacken that feature, but actually to tear the eyeball from the socket.

This very unlovely practice among the Romans seems thus far to have attracted little attention; but there is plenty of evidence of it. Thus, speaking of Nero's profligate father, Suetonius says again:

Nero, 5. 1: *et Romae medio foro cuidam equiti Romano liberius iurganti oculum eruit.*

The most astonishing point in this incident is that the mutilation did not occur in a bar-room fight or water-front scuffle. The thing was done in the open forum, the victim was a gentleman of standing, and the perpetrator a companion of princes and at one time praetor.

A somewhat similar story is told of Domitian, but with mitigating circumstances. Badly wounded by an assassin, he dragged the man to the floor, and in the struggle that followed divided his attention between the attempt to disarm his adversary, and, with his maimed fingers, to dig out his eyes:

Dom. 17. 2: *atque illum (Domitianum) interim arrepto deductoque ad terram Stephano conluctatum diu, dum modo ferrum extorquere, modo quamquam laniatis digitis oculos effodere conatur.*

According to Suetonius, even Augustus was not above an action of this sort; and, while we may well doubt the authenticity of the

story he relates, the mere fact that he retails it without comment goes far to support the view that gouging out of eyes was a practice all too familiar to the Romans:

Aug. 27. 4: paulo post per centuriones et milites raptum (praetorem) e tribunali servilem in modum torsit (Augustus) ac . . . iussit occidi, prius oculis eius sua manu effossis.¹

A reference back to Plautus shows that, in his day, too, the gouging out of eyes was a commonplace. In a few passages, it is true, such a proposal might seem to be suggested by special circumstances, as when a miser threatens to tear out the eyes of a servant, lest she discover the hiding place of his gold (Aul. 53 ff.):

*Oculos hercle ego istos, improba, ecfodiam tibi,
Ne me observare possis, quid rerum geram.*²

But in other cases the eye is singled out merely as the favorite point of attack, e.g. in altercation (Pers. 793 ff.):

DO. Ne sis me uno digito attigeris; ne te ad terram, scelus, adfligam.
PAE. At tibi ego hoc continuo cyatho *oculum excutiam tuom.*³

In this connection, Plautus does not hesitate at bits of realism, e.g. Rud. 658 ff. and Men. 1011 ff.:

Age nunciam,
Iube oculos elidere, *itidem ut sepiis faciunt coqui.*

MES. *Eripe oculum isti*, ab umero qui tenet, ere, te obsecro.

MEN. *Teneo ego huic oculum.* MES. Fac ut *oculi locus in capite appareat.*

A somewhat lighter turn is given to the matter by the loquacious slave who will not be silenced even by the prospect of the loss of an eye (Tri. 463 ff.):

LE. *Oculum ego ecfodiam tibi,*
Si verbum addideris. ST. Herkle qui dicam tamen;
Nam si sic non licebit, *lucus dixero.*

¹ With this tale may be compared the story of the gruesome death of M. Marius Gratidianus. Sulla was ultimately responsible for this outrage; but Catiline probably was his agent in the matter, and some of the refinements of cruelty (such as cutting off the ears and gouging out the eyes) may have been inspirations of his fertile brain; see Livy Per. 88, Val. Max. ix. 2. 1, Lucan, Phar. ii. 173 ff., Q. Cic., De Petit. Cons. 3. 10, etc.

² Cf. Aul. 189, Mil. G. 315. So, too, Sen., Nat. Q. iv. 4. 1.

³ Cf. Curc. 396, Poen. 382. So Terence, Eun. 740.

Most significant of all, perhaps, is the fact that this sort of thing was so familiar as to allow of metaphorical application (Capt. 464):

Nam hercle huic diei, si liceat, *oculos effodiam* lubens.

Cicero has not much to say of the tearing out of eyes. But the M. Marius Gratidianus mentioned in an earlier note was a distant relative of his;¹ and he once describes such a death as befalling a hypothetical individual, apparently at the hands of an infuriated mob:

De Re Publ. iii. 27: si in eo sit errore civitas, ut bonum illum virum sceleratum . . . putet, . . . proque hac opinione omnium civium bonus ille vir vexetur, rapiatur, manus ei denique adferantur, *effodiantr oculi*, . . .

Twice in the Verrine orationes he mentions the beating of men across the eyes with rods.²

This tendency to make the eye the favorite point of attack goes hand in hand with an unusual wealth of expressions attesting the esteem in which eyesight was held, presenting here a marked contrast to present-day English.³ Thus, in asseverations and the like the measure of the speaker's determination or compliance is sometimes his willingness to lose his sight, e.g. Plautus, Men. 156 ff. and Ps. 510:

Oculum ecfodito per solum

Mihi, Menaechme, si ullum verbum faxo, nisi quod iusseris.

Ecidito⁴ mihi hercle *oculum*, si dedero.⁵

Horace uses a similar expression in Serm. ii. 5. 35 ff.:

Eripiet quivis *oculos* citius mihi, quam te
Contemptum cassa nuce pauperet.

Another tribute to the worth of the eyes is found in the phrase *per oculos iurare*; e.g. Plautus, Men. 1060 ff.:

Si voltis *per oculos iurare*, nilo hercle ea causa magis
Facietis ut ego hinc hodie abstulerim pallam et spinter, pessumae.

¹ De Off. iii. 67. On this incident, Lucan (Phars. ii. 184) is specially gruesome: *ille cavis evolvit sedibus orbēs*.

² In Verr. ii. 5. 112 and 142.

³ There is good Scripture, however, for "The light of the body is the eye," "Keep me as the apple of the eye," etc.

⁴ M. *Excludito*.

⁵ Here again there are analogies in English literature, as, "Strike me blind, if," etc. For the thought, cf. locutions like Plautus, Ps. 520: *Servitum tibi me abducito, ni fecero.*

This form of oath seems a favorite in amatory poetry.¹

The value of the sight is attested again in the use of the words *oculus* and *ocellus* as terms of endearment, e.g. Plautus, *Most.* 311 (*oculus meus*), *Tri.* 245 (*ocelle mi*), etc. So Catullus 50. 19.

These same expressions are applied to things that are pre-eminent in their class. So, in the joy of his home-coming, Catullus thus addresses the promontory of Sirmio (*Car.* 31. 1 ff.):

Paene insularum, Sirmio, insularumque
*Ocelle.*²

Much more striking is the similar use of *oculus* by Cicero in a staid prose passage:

De Nat. Deo. iii. 91: Critolaus, inquam, evertit Corinthum, Karthaginem Hasdrubal. Hi duo *illos oculos orae maritimae effoderunt.*³

He refers also to certain villas as *ocellos Italiae* (*Ad Att.* xvi. 6. 2).

Finally, the valuation put upon sight is revealed by declarations that something is "dearer than one's eyes," e.g. Terence, *Adel.* 700 ff.:

Di me, pater,
Omnes oderint, ni *magis te quam oculos nunc amo meos.*⁴

This phrase caught the fancy of Catullus in a marked degree, and he uses the idea in various ways, e.g. *Car.* 82:

Quinti, si tibi vis *oculos debere* Catullum
Aut aliud *si quid carius est oculis,*
Eripere ei noli multo *quod carius illi*
*Est oculus seu quid carius est oculus.*⁵

¹ Cf. Ovid, *Amor.* ii. 16. 44, iii. 3. 10 ff., iii. 11. 48; *Propert.* i. 15. 33; *Tibullus*, iv. 5. 8; etc.

² In like connection, we should say "gem," perhaps. In the Latin expression the idea of beauty, of course, is prominent; note the comparison of the eyes to stars, e.g. Ovid. *Amor.* ii. 16. 44, iii. 3. 9.

³ Observe here the familiar suggestion of *gouging out* the eye. Cf., too, the very similar passage in Just. v. 8, where, speaking of Athens, he says: *negarunt se Spartiani ex duabus Graeciae oculis alterum erepturos.*

Expressing regret for the loss which the state sustained when Pompey went down to defeat at Pharsalus, Vell. Pat. (ii. 52) uses the same figure, but substitutes *lumen* for *oculus* (*effossum . . . alterum Romani imperii lumen*). Cicero again refers to Corinth in the following terms (*De Imp. Pomp.* 11): *Corinthum patres vestri, totius Graeciae lumen, extinctum esse voluerunt.* Here, of course, the figure is changed, and *lumen* means "light."

⁴ Cf. line 903 of the same play.

⁵ So also 3. 5, 14. 1, 104. 2. Cf. the similar locution in Suet. *Vit. Horat.*: *Ni te visceribus meis, Horati, plus iam diligo.* Perhaps, too, there is a tribute to the value of the sight in the practice of kissing the eyes, e.g. Catullus, 9. 9, 48. 1.

Possibly another reason for singling out the eye as the point of attack was the fact that this was the surest way of spoiling effectively any grace of countenance the victim might possess. The casualties of war meant the loss of many an eye; for the fact that the trunk of a heavy-armed soldier was better protected than his face rendered the head, even in long range fighting, a favorite target despite its relative smallness. Caesar mentions a hot fight in which four of the six centurions of a single cohort were blinded.¹

Naturally it is of the officers' wounds that we hear. Such catastrophes must have been far more numerous among the rank and file; and the veteran with sunken eye-socket doubtless was a familiar figure throughout Italy. Yet the expressions found in the Roman writers indicate that familiarity with the disfigurement did not detract from its repulsiveness. Thus, in speaking of the movement of some troops under depressing circumstances, Tacitus introduces the climax by mentioning that the commanding officer was hideous because of the loss of an eye:

Hist. iv. 62: Detexit ignominiam campus et dies. Revolsae imperatorum imagines, inhonora signa, . . . ; silens agmen, et velut longae exsequiae; dux Claudius Sanctus *effosso oculo dirus ore*, ingenio debilior.

It is in striking language that he represents Civilis, the Gallic leader, as putting himself in a class with Sertorius and Hannibal because of his lack of an eye:

Hist. iv. 13: Sed Civilis . . . Sertorium se aut Hannibalem ferens *simili oris dehonestamento*, . . . Vespaiani amicitiam . . . praetendit.²

Vergil, of course, plays upon this feeling when he paints the repulsiveness of Polyphemus (*Aen.* iii. 635 ff. and 662 ff.):

et telo *lumen terebramus* acuto,
Ingens, quod torva solum sub fronte latebat.

Postquam altos tetigit fluctus et ad aequora venit,
Luminis effossi fluidum lavit inde cruentem.

So the horror of the reputed fate of Regulus is intensified by the promi-

¹ Bell. Civ. iii. 53. Lucan describes in detail a wound that destroys the eyesight (*Phars.* iii. 709 ff.).

² Cf. *Ann.* ii. 9: *deformitas oris*.

nence given the injury to his eyes (*palpebris resectis*): see Cicero, in Pis. 43, Val. Max. ix. 2, Ex. 1, and Aul. Gell. vii. 4. 3.¹

In view of the cruelty that appears to be innate in man, it is very likely that such sad disfigurement was often made the subject of ridicule and jest; cf. Plautus, Curc. 392:

LY. Unocule, salve. CV. Quaeso, deridesne me?

The first clause is addressed to a man who has one eye covered by a patch. His reply shows that he takes umbrage at the term used; and, in what follows he claims the consideration due to a man honorably wounded in battle.²

There is a similar suggestion in the bout of buffoons in Horace, Serm. i. 5. 51 ff., where the rustic whose forehead is disfigured by a rough scar is asked to impersonate the Cyclops (*saltaret . . . Cyclopa*). And, while it is not altogether easy to determine Juvenal's point of view in x. 157 ff., it can hardly be intended as a compliment that he pictures Hannibal as a one-eyed leader perched upon an elephant:

O qualis facies et quali digna tabella,
Cum Gaetula ducem portaret belua luscum!

There may be difference of opinion regarding this passage or some of the subsidiary questions here raised; but there is little room for doubt about the main thesis, namely that, in personal encounters, the Romans were particularly prone to strike viciously at the eye.³

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¹ Caesar speaks of amputating ears and gouging out an eye as part of the policy of frightfulness whereby Vercingetorix imposed his will on his countrymen. Though Caesar does not elsewhere refer to the practice, it is worthy of note that he here uses the phrase that is all but technical, namely *singulis effossis oculis* (Bell. Gall. vii. 4).

² Cf. the stricture of Persius (Sat. i. 128) on the use of *lusce* as a form of address to one who has lost an eye. Worthy of remark in this connection is Pliny's brief note (Nat. Hist. xi. 37. 55. 150): *Luscinii iniuriae cognomen haberunt*. So the emperor Commodus is credited with dubbing "luscini" those whom he had deprived of an eye (Lampr. Vit. Comm. 10). Probably, therefore, Horace meant to give an added sting in citing the cognomen *Lucus* in Serm. i. 5. 34: *Aufidio Lusco praetore*.

³ Petronius contributes two or three interesting cases. Twice, in place of *manus in ora intentare* (cf. Tacitus, Hist. ii. 69), he uses the expression *manus in oculos intentare* (Sat. 9 and 108). There is even more "point" to the passage in which an individual is said to catch up a spit with which he lunges at another's eyes (*alius veru . . . in oculos eius intentat*), Sat. 95.